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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: POLITICAL PARTIES PREPARE FOR
MUSTAQBAL'S SHOWDOWN WITH AOUN AND NASRALLAH

BEIRUT 00003264 001.3 OF 003

Classified By: Christopher W. Murray, Charge d'Affaires. Reason: Section 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Observers on all sides of Lebanese politics are anticipating heightened political rhetoric, calls for the Siniora cabinet to resign, and possibly street demonstrations or violent clashes in the next few weeks. As the end of Ramadan comes nearer, many people are anxious that simmering tensions, held in check during the religious season, may erupt. The Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) of General Michel Aoun has scheduled a rally for October 15. The FPM may be in a last-ditch effort to win a clutch of cabinet posts and maybe even the presidency. Meanwhile, the rival Mustaqbal party is hobbled by internal divisions, including a possible effort to undermine Siniora from within. The smaller Christian parties are splitting between the March 14 and March 8 camps, and there may be an opening for a less-prominent Christian to garner Hizballah's support for the presidency. Speaker Berri's Amal party, with perhaps the most to lose, is trying to avoid a split among the Shia while preventing a change of government. End Summary.

TENSION UNIVERSAL

2. (C) A few days before the planned FPM rally on October 15, and ten days before the end of Ramadan, political tensions are high in Beirut. Expectations of a clash between the GOL and its dominant party, Saad Hariri's Mustaqbal (Future) Movement, versus its rivals in the FPM and Hizballah, are near-universal.

3. (C) FPM leader Michel Aoun has made increasingly-strident public statements, most notably attacking UNIFIL for preventing Lebanese self-defense against Israel, and vowing that "Lebanon will not rest until Prime Minister Siniora leaves." While the FPM's most prominent public demand has been for an expansion of the cabinet, which Siniora has repeatedly refused, Aoun's statements have gone so far as to

back the forcible ousting of the PM on at least two occasions. This fact has led many to conclude that if the cabinet expansion is not granted by the end of Ramadan, Aoun and his Hizballah allies will take to the streets and provoke civil unrest to topple the March 14 government.

¶4. (C) While there is little evidence that the parties have already begun sponsoring violence, physical clashes began on September 30, when Berri and Hariri supporters fought in west Beirut streets until the LAF broke up the clashes. On October 6 gunfire broke out between personnel of the Internal Security Force (ISF), the Sunni-dominated security service, and mostly Shia residents of south Beirut. The ISF was in the Shia-dominated neighborhood to assist in destroying illegally-constructed houses along the airport road, which were considered a public nuisance. Two boys died over the weekend of the gunshot wounds they received in the clash, and a single grenade was thrown over the front gate of the ISF headquarters. Though it produced no injuries, the grenade cannot but have been a warning to the ISF, and it was followed on October 9 by vandalism of the official car of an ISF officer.

FPM OPTIONS

¶5. (C) The FPM has several incentives to topple the government, and its alternatives are few and unappealing to its ambitious leadership. The presidency, Aoun's paramount desire, is unavailable to him at present; the isolated Emile Lahoud can only be replaced by the agreement of the Parliament, where the March 14 Coalition enjoys a majority. Should the Siniora government last until September 2007, when the process of electing a new president must begin, and the Parliament cannot muster a two-thirds majority for a single candidate, the FPM will face its most dire prospect: the cabinet will govern alone, as stipulated by the constitution, indefinitely until a president can be elected.

¶6. (C) Meanwhile, Aoun may realize that this is his last

BEIRUT 00003264 002.3 OF 003

chance. Furthermore, and perhaps more dangerously, his supporters may realize it is also theirs. Their party is so closely identified with its leader, as every Lebanese party is, that should Aoun have to retire from politics, his top officials could drift off to other movements or new ones, or destroy each other by fighting over Aoun's legacy. The Free Patriotic Movement lacks not only party institutions but also, increasingly, public support. Engineering the fall of the government -- whether by forcing it to resign by public disorder or bringing it down through the resignation of a quorum of its ministers -- may be Aoun supporters' last chance for political relevance.

MUSTAQBAL SHOWING DIVISIONS

¶7. (C) The technocratic Siniora enjoys public respect, but clearly has no passionate political backing; for example, there are no political posters of him on display even in those areas most likely to support him. Meanwhile, some observers suspect that Mustaqbal leader Saad Hariri has begun to undermine Siniora as a prelude to replacing him. Hariri's behavior suggests that at the very least, he is competing with Siniora over the same political turf. In Iftar speeches during the first two weeks of Ramadan, Hariri has made policy pronouncements that would ordinarily be expected from a head of government, or at least by a minister. The Hariri blessing is reportedly more important than ministerial approval for investors, international bureaucrats, and others hoping to work with the GOL or with its agencies.

¶8. (C) Many have noted that though Siniora has been received at the White House and had a two-hour meeting with President Bush, French President Jacques Chirac has not invited Siniora

to the Elysee Palace despite strong French support for the Mustaqbal party to which he belongs. It is speculated that Nazek Hariri, widow of Rafiq Hariri and stepmother of Saad, and friend of Chirac, has vetoed any Siniora visit to Paris out of fear that Siniora will continue to overshadow Saad Hariri. Hariri's enemies claim he is alarmed that Siniora's newfound popularity and international profile have eclipsed his own. Indeed, a recent poll shows Siniora as the most popular choice for Prime Minister with over 40 percent of the public's support, whereas Hariri came in fourth at a little over 3 percent.

LEBANESE FORCES, KATA'EB,
AND SMALL CHRISTIAN PARTIES

¶9. (C) The tug-of-war between March 14 and March 8 is deepening the splits among Lebanese Christians. Samir Ja'ja's Lebanese Forces are the most firmly in the March 14 camp, having laid down the gauntlet to Michel Aoun in Ja'ja's September 24 speech in Harissa. However, the LF has no public political activities planned for the rest of October, and lacks the financial resources of other players. One LF contact shared with us that Hizballah has already planned to abandon Aoun; allegedly, Nasrallah proposed to Hariri (through intermediaries) that his party would support a presidential candidate acceptable to March 14, such as Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh or publisher and former minister Michel Edde (both clear presidential hopefuls), to clinch a deal that would include extra representation for Hizballah in the cabinet.

¶10. (C) The Kata'eb Party, represented in the Siniora cabinet by Pierre Gemayel, has just undergone a historic reunification after years of infighting and is struggling to redefine its position. A party contact shared with polchief his dire concern about the coming weeks and appealed for a compromise with March 8 forces, including some expansion of the cabinet. While supporting Siniora in principle and favoring a political solution to Hizballah's arms, Kata'eb goes further than any Christian group, other than the FPM, in legitimizing the "resistance weapons." A Kata'eb official has shared with us in confidence the possibility that it may initiate a dialogue with Hizballah before the end of 2006.

¶11. (C) Kata'eb reflects Christian consensus on a series of steps to reassert Christian power in Lebanon. Its proposals are listed in a draft internal white paper shared with

BEIRUT 00003264 003.3 OF 003

polchief, which calls for a wide range of reforms based on a full implementation of Ta'if. These include a Senate composed of confessional representatives, strengthening the role of the President, administrative decentralization, and elections to the Constitutional Council. Kata'eb will also demand a new election law and provisions requiring both the President and the Speaker to act on proposed legislation within a certain time limit. The party proposes a National Christian Conference to be held later in 2006 to discuss these ideas.

BERRI AND AMAL

¶12. (C) The Berri Bloc will not commit itself to stand by the March 14 government nor will it rush to join forces seeking to topple the March 14 Cabinet. Berri's highest interest is to maintain his independence and freedom of maneuver vis-a-vis Hizballah. Amal, though, knows it is far better off with stability; should the cabinet be expanded or re-formed, or early parliamentary elections called, Amal will lose power relative to Hizballah, which sees itself triumphant and energetic after its "victory" over Israel.

¶13. (C) Berri is therefore seized with the importance of this political moment and the risks it carries for Lebanon. This

concern was witnessed by his recent appeal in Riyadh for Saudi help in easing sectarian tensions and convincing Syria to cease its support for toppling Siniora. Berri also believes that USG engagement with Syria is crucial to contain Damascus' interference in Lebanon.

¶14. (C) The March 14 cabinet should take two steps immediately to enhance its chances of survival, according to a top Berri advisor. The clashes with Berri must cease, in particular acting Interior Minister Fatfat's challenges to the autonomy of the Shia-dominated Surete Generale. In addition, the cabinet must perform far better in reconstructing and governing the country to win back the public's confidence.

¶15. (C) Amal assesses that demonstrations to topple the government are unlikely this month. Optimism is not generally a feature of Amal thinking, but wishful thinking may be; resolved to stay on the sidelines until its parliamentary power or financial interests are threatened, Amal has no interest in forcing a conclusion to the political crisis. Aware that he cannot stray too far from Hizballah's positions, Berri has begun to redefine Hizballah's message in his own public statements. For example, he told the press on October 7 that Hizballah does not seek the fall of Siniora's government.

¶16. (C) Part of the reason for Amal's reticence is that it has no favored solution to one of the most crucial questions in the crisis -- the presidency. According to a top Berri advisor, "no one can be President; no longer Aoun, and if it were Ja'ja' we'd prefer Lahoud." While Saad Hariri has undoubtedly identified several potential presidential candidates from among less-prominent Maronite figures in the March 14 movement, Amal has cultivated neither Sunni nor Christian leaders.

COMMENT

¶17. (C) While opinions differ over the relative strength of the competing March 14/March 8 alliances, every political actor in Lebanon expects increased tension and possible clashes beginning as soon as October 15 and at least by the week following Ramadan. Most of our non-March 8 contacts are worried about the effects of unrest, but believe that March 14 has the strength to stay in power. The FPM and Hizballah obviously fancy their chances in a confrontation, or at least feel they can only gain by shaking up the government. Because both March 8 and March 14 are diverse alliances, and therefore subject to fragmentation or internal betrayal, the winner in this showdown may be the alliance that possesses not the most brute strength, but the most internal cohesion.

MURRAY